

Testimony of Masha Gnezdilova
House International Relations Committee
June 15, 2006

My name is Masha. I am 33 years old. By education I'm a lawyer in the field of social services. I previously worked as an inspector in the social security services department and as a human resource manager in a medical college.

In 1996, I visited my relatives in St. Petersburg. While standing in a line at the railway station to buy a ticket home, I met a middle-age woman who seemed very nice. During our conversation she mentioned that she has good friends in Germany who are looking for a young Russian girl to assist them with housekeeping. She offered me a chance to go to Germany to see the country and learn the language as well as to earn some money. At the time, I had not been to a foreign country and was unemployed. The opportunity seemed interesting and I agreed. This woman helped me fill out the necessary paper work and in the beginning of 1997 I left for Germany on a bus.

In Hamburg, I was met by a young Russian woman named Janna. She brought me to her home and immediately took my passport away, acting as though she wanted to show it to the people I was supposed to work for. The next day, she met three more Russian girls at the bus station and brought them to her home as well. Their passports were also taken away. Later that day, Janna informed me that the job I had been promised did not exist. However, she said that there was no need for me to go home as she would provide me with another job. Janna took all of us by car to a bar called "Sixty Four" where prostitutes worked. Janna told us that we would work as prostitutes and that there was no sense in resisting or complaining – in fact, it would be dangerous to do so. She threatened that if anyone tried to escape to the police she would be severely beaten since they have their own people in the police and runaways would be returned regardless and punished.

I decided not to behave aggressively and pretended to be completely compliant; I even tried to demonstrate frustration when clients did not select me. Janna believed my act and began looking for an appropriate bar for me. This is how I came to work in several German bars.

One day, Janna brought me and three other girls to a bar in a small city on the highway Hamburg-Hanover. I don't remember the name of the city, but it was close to Bielefeld. The bar's name was "Savoy" and it was closed. Two day later, we found out that the reason the bar was closed was that several Russian girls had recently been murdered there. Now that the situation with the police had been cleared up and the club re-opened, we were brought in to replace the murdered girls. There we found the clothes, underwear and purses of the murdered girls.

At the bar's grand opening, we worked as hostesses and prostitutes. We were not allowed to leave this place and had no documents. Fortunately, approximately a week later the bar was raided and we were taken to the police department in Bielefeld. At the police department, a Russian female lawyer questioned us. She pitied us and we were released into the streets. We did not have anywhere to go. No one told us about any shelters or services. We were lost and afraid in a strange country. We didn't know the language and had no money, so we went back to the bar.

We had hoped that we could get our things, call for help and arrange our escape but there was someone at the bar waiting for us who called Janna. That evening, Janna came to take me back to Hamburg. There she sold me to another pimp for \$1000 and again I was put to work in one of the German bars as a prostitute. In a week this bar was also raided by the police and I was again detained at the police department. Later, I was released and was supposed to pick up my documents at another place. I did not know German or the city but kind local people helped me get there. When I finally got there, they did not have a translator but my documents were ready for my deportation from Germany. I wanted to explain what had happened and that I shouldn't be deported, but nobody wanted to listen or talk to me and I ran away.

Usually when a girl's visa expires or when she is detained by the police, the traffickers provide her with a false passport (at that time for me it was a Polish one) and they immediately traffic her to the Netherlands. Most of the criminal groups have clubs in both Germany and the Netherlands, where they also sell drugs.

The other girls from the German night club were given false passports and trafficked to Holland, but I could not tolerate it anymore. I stopped eating and told my pimp that I would jump from the fourth floor. He believed me and was afraid that I would draw more attention from the police; I don't know exactly why, but this man helped me buy a ticket home and come back to Russia.

Thus, in two months I was back home. But even two years later, I was depressed and had many troubles. Then I found an ad in a newspaper for the St. Petersburg Crisis Center for Women, which provides psychological assistance to the victims of human trafficking. I contacted them and they invited me to come in. This is how I came across the Angel Coalition. From them, I received psychological, moral and material assistance. I went back to my town and started an NGO which is a member of the Angel Coalition.

It seems like we Russian women are placed in impossible economic conditions and are not needed by our own country. In other countries, we are spit on as prostitutes when we are really victims. Ten years have passed since I was trafficked, but the situation has still not changed.

Is the German government really not aware of what is happening in their country? Or are they happy to profit from our suffering?